

OLD ROBERTSON'S RANCH.

BY CHARLES B. LEWIS.

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Here on the road between Fort Yuba and the town of San Quintin, looking down from the west bank of Dog creek, and having hills to the north and a ten-mile plain to the south, stands Robertson's ranch. The name "ranch" is a misnomer. There are no horses or cattle—no farming. In other days, when the stage took this route, it was a road house. It is a small house yet, but fallen into decay and having so bad a reputation that both civil and military authorities keep an eye on it. There are two adobe buildings—a house and a shed barn. There is no inclosure—no shade—no surroundings except a stack of wry hay, a broken-down wagon and a heap of poles which have been brought from the hills for firewood. It is a lonely, sickening place, and with three or four men skulking about it would be a noisy tenderfoot who would dismount at the door, even at broad noonday.

It is 3 o'clock in the afternoon of an August day, and the sun is boiling down on Robertson's ranch in a way to burn the grass off by the roots. Stretched at full length on the floor of the bar room, with a grizzled, vicious-looking man of fifty. He has been asleep for an hour. A door leading into what seems to be a living room softly opens and a girl steps into the bar room, looks about inquiringly, and then walks to the front door and gazes out. Her eyes and a face which would have attracted a second look on 5th avenue. Her apparel was coarse, but well-fitting. It was what might be called "half-Mexican—half-civilized." "Wake up, dad!"

A mile or more up the trail the girl had caught sight of a horseman headed for the ranch.

"Eh, Kit, what is it?" growls the half-awake man in reply.

"Humph!"

He yawned, turned over on his side, rubbed his eyes and slowly got up and staggered over to the door. After a look up the trail he said:

"Better vamoose!"

Without a word she turned and made her way to the rear room, but she did not stop there. She passed out of the side door and out to the shed and around to the shady side of it and sat down with her back to the wall. By the time the stranger's horseman rode up old Robertson was very much awake, and met him with a smile and a nod.

"Hot!" muttered the stranger.

"Hot as—"

"You are John Robertson?"

"Yes, but I'm not a soldier."

The stranger turned his horse loose and entered the bar room. He wasn't a tender-

foot—he wasn't an ex-soldier—he wasn't the county sheriff. Robertson had met all sorts of men, and he knew that his caller was a man of some consequence.

"For a minute they sized each other up, and during those sixty seconds had either side of them a right hand by so much as an inch there would have been a killing."

"I came to have a talk with you," said the stranger.

"Go ahead."

"Anybody about?"

"Only Kit, but I reckon we'll go outdoors. Come out to the shed."

The girl was on the outside of the shed—the men entered it and sat down close together on an old box. Girl and men were separated by an earthen wall a foot thick, but it had crumbled and was full of holes.

"Ever hear of Jim Finch?" queried the stranger, as he lit his pipe.

"Yes—horse thief, rustler and road agent."

"And they tell me you are a game man?"

"If there's more to you than you look like, plenty of money. I want to hold up the army paymaster on his next trip, and here's the spot to do it. There's six of the boys, and we two make eight. There won't be over eight or nine in the escort, even if it comes to fighting."

"How'll you work it?"

"Easy enough."

And with the girl Kit listening to every word from the other side of the wall the stranger proceeded to give the details of a plot which had been hatched weeks before and many miles away. Fort Yuba was the first of the five forts on the paymaster's route. His escort consisted of eight or ten thousand dollars. His usual escort was a sergeant and six men. With his clerk and driver of the ambulances there would be nine men, all well armed and ready to fight in defense of the money. Eight rough and ready men might ambush and get away with a small sum of money, but it was to be no killing if it could be avoided. In case of a fight some of the outlaws would go down as well. They wanted the money instead of the bullets, and Jim Finch thought it could be got without a man being grazed. When he had given the details Robertson extended his hand and said:

"I'm your man—shake!"

"Good! I knew you had sand!"

Ten minutes later when the stranger was galloping away and old Robertson had entered the bar room, the girl queried in a careless way:

"What did he want, dad?"

"Wanted me to help run some cattle."

"But you won't?"

"Reckon not. Things are gettin' skeery about here, and I'm thinkin' I'd better get up and leave in a few days. The sheriff's nosin' about, and the soldiers don't stop here any more. D'rat 'em, they wouldn't let a man make an honest livin' in this country."

The girl walked over to him, and resting a hand on either shoulder looked him in the eyes and said:

"Oh, dad, I hope you'll get out of this! It's a horrible place, and you don't know how lonely I am. Why do you drag me around from one place to another like this? We haven't had a real home since I can remember."

"Don't get started on that tack!" he gruffly replied, and yet there was a thread of kindness in his gruffness.

"I can't help it. I don't know what you want. Why don't you come back? The soldiers drove you away from San Jose; the sheriff drove you away from Queen; they scared you away from Bell Rose. You are dodging about all the time; you have had men come here. I've stuck to you, dad, when I could have out and run, as they say, but I'm getting tired."

"Kit, haven't I bin a good dad to you?" he asked after a long look at her.

"Most times, yes," she replied, "but I'm here all alone, and I might as well be dead, and I sometimes wonder—wonder—"

"What do you mean, Kit?" he asked, as she paced and turned her face.

"Are you my real dad?" she demanded, as she looked into his eyes.

"That's the third time you've asked that question within two years!" he sternly replied, "and I'd like to know what's come over you. If I ain't yer daddy what ye doin' here? What am I takin' keer of ye for? Who's bin talkin' to ye?"

"Nobody."

"Then drop it! I don't blame ye fer bein' tired of the ranch and the folks and the hell blamed air! But I'll tell ye, prides around, same as I am myself, but how kin we leave? What we got to go on? Why don't ye wait till I make a race?"

"Then you are my real daddy?" she persisted.

"Yes, Kit, I never laid a hand on ye in my life," he whispered, "but don't drive me too far! Set up on stick talk or sun-thin'll happen! It looks like ye wanted to know."

"Ever hear of Jim Finch?"

To disown yer parent and cut sticks, and such things rile me!"

She entered the back room without another word, and old Robertson walked outdoors just as Jim Finch rode up. The two walked off to the shed and sat down in the same place as before and held a conversation lasting for an hour.

Old Robertson hung about the bar room and acted nervous and uneasy, and he looked at his guests in a strange way.

Then he slipped into the rear room, and he might have seen him by the flashes of lightning as he ran up the trail. A few minutes after his disappearance the father master and his clerk went to their rooms, leaving their doors open, while the sentinel sat down on a chair and wondered at the soldier's conduct.

There were thirty minutes of wind, deluge and reverberating thunder, and then the storm beatled down to work, as it were, there being a steady downpour, with now and then a blaze of lightning. The outside door had been shut to keep the storm out, and by and by the sentinel in the doorway could not be opened.

He raised his voice and repeated the question, and then got out of bed to find the soldier fast asleep in his chair. He shook him, but the man did not awake.

"Whisky, eh?" whispered the paymaster as he bent over and got a sniff of the man's breath. "If he go on no more, the others did also. Queer whisky! He was perfectly sober thirty minutes ago."

"At that moment the door of the living room opened and the girl Kit stepped into the bar. She walked straight up to the man, noticed his condition, and turned on the soldier.

"Didn't I tell you to warn 'em?"

"And so I did," he replied.

"They've all got it and it's been drugged. Dad, fix to drug the coffee, but I beat him at it. He's out now to meet a gang and bring 'em in to get the safe, and you better be ready to meet 'em."

The clerk came out at that moment, and the two men started for the shed. It was

"She's gone, too, captain."

pitch dark out doors and darker still under the shed, but after groping around for awhile they found a sleeping man. A vigorous shake failed to arouse him, and they groped and discovered a second, third and fourth. Every man and partaken of the drugged whisky, and every man had been drugged to insensibility. The captain was cursing and the clerk groping for other bodies when they were joined by Kit.

"Don't delay here!" she exclaimed. "Daddy meant to do for 'em and has to get out of the house in a minute, and they won't let you two live stand in the way of that safe. Bring in all the carbines and cartridges you can lay hands on!"

They felt about and got hold of four carbines and four or five belts full of cartridges, and they came now and then in her hand, the girl led them back to the rear door and secured the heavy blinds.

The door was made fast, and she brought another light into the barroom and said:

"To see the loopholes cut by the doors and windows? There's others in the back room. Daddy shouldn't have gone into this, but I hope he won't get hurt. I hate to see you die, but I'll risk it."

Life. Get ready for a hot fight, for daddy must have a desperate gang behind him."

During the next hour the rain came down steadily and monotonously, and no other sounds were heard. The three on watch inside blew out one of the candles and the other two lit the candles and whistled. By and by the rain ceased, and hardly had it done so when a gentle tapping was heard at the back door.

The three on watch made fast the door with their hands, and the girl called out to one of the loopholes. Kit called out:

"Is that you, daddy?"

"Yes, open the door," he replied.

"What've you done with the soldiers?"

"Tied 'em up. Open the door."

"Who's out there with you?"

"No matter—open up."

"I can't do it, daddy. You fixed to drug the captain and his clerk, but I made new curtains, they might have kept on to Silver Springs but for the big thunder storm rising in the west."

Kit waited on the paymaster and his clerk

at supper. Both had heard of her, but neither had seen her before. The captain did his best to start a conversation with her, but the girl was brusque in her answers and soon discouraged him. She conferred herself to monosyllables until just as they were ready to retire, and having opened the door to the bar room and made sure that her father was not there, she tipped back to the captain and whispered:

"Don't let the soldiers get hold of any of dad's whisky tonight!"

"Why?" he asked, as he regarded her with surprise.

"Because."

Her father's step was heard in the bar room, and she slipped out of the door without completing the sentence. A minute later the captain left the table and sauntered out doors. There was a wild play of lightning among the black clouds in the west, but the storm was yet miles away. Strolling out to the shed he nodded to the sentinel, who just finished his supper, and as the latter came over to him, he said:

"Sergeant, you know the reputation of the money man?"

"Yes, sir."

"Robertson is an old scoundrel and hates the military like poison. While he's here, he'll be sure to get a barrel of whisky, and half an hour later the storm broke, and a wild night came on. For a moment the sentinel in the doorway could not be opened.

He raised his voice and repeated the question, and then got out of bed to find the soldier fast asleep in his chair. He shook him, but the man did not awake.

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They felt about and got hold of four carbines and four or five belts full of cartridges, and they came now and then in her hand, the girl led them back to the rear door and secured the heavy blinds.

The door was made fast, and she brought another light into the barroom and said:

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